

Alternatives to Violence Project

In Sincelejo and Montería in the northern part of Colombia, and in Bogotá, our team of four Colombian and two US facilitators, conducted three Advanced and three Training for Facilitators (T4F) workshops

In Sincelejo, the sixteen participants were mostly from displaced communities. In Montería, the fourteen participants were mostly Catholic community outreach workers or teachers and a few Protestants, including two from Baranquilla, about 100 miles away. This was the first ecumenical activity sponsored by the Catholic Diocese of Montería. The twelve participants, in Bogotá, were mostly lay members of various Protestant churches with various professions in education and social service.

Twenty-two apprentice facilitators from three different cities graduated, and the eight Bogotá participants need only one more day of training to graduate. The four Colombian facilitators who worked with us are committed to continuing AVP workshops and establishing a

separate PAV-Colombia non-governmental organization.

The Sincelejo and Montería workshops were partially funded through a grant to REMPAZ. Some follow-up (Basic workshops by the new apprentices with mentoring by the experienced facilitators) will be paid for by a World Council of Churches grant. The experienced PAV-Colombia team will combine trips for the paid workshops so that some unpaid ones can also be offered.

The four Colombian facilitators are part of the group trained by Friends Peace Teams in 2003. Each expressed gratitude for the personal help that AVP has given them. One, the coordinator of PAV-Colombia, was especially articulate about this. All four are working part-time or are unemployed, and living with extended families in Bogotá. Two are young men who are conscientious objectors and the women support alternatives to military service, too. The women also work with women's groups in hopes that women can experience the empowerment that AVP offers.



"Team Mango" in Montería

Audrey

Val

Friends Peace Teams

Proyecto Alternativas a la Violencia Workshops

Three of the facilitators are active in their faith communities—Catholic and Protestant—and are excited by AVP's spiritual component. AVP has a tradition of not using religious language or concepts, and some of them were puzzled by this, seeing it as a failure to take advantage of an important aspect of participants' lives. Some participants also complained that the workshops lacked Biblical orientation. In past workshops, participants have been encouraged to have optional devotional activities outside workshop sessions, and this has generally answered their concerns.

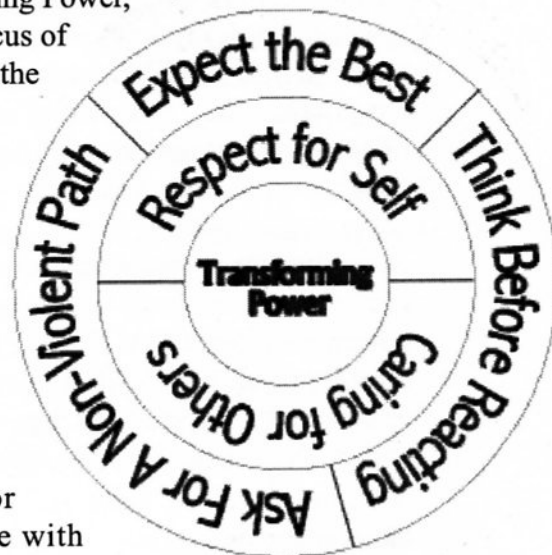
AVP's style of experiential education fits in very well in Colombia. Participants regularly praise it as a better way to learn than the lecture and memorization of their formal education. AVP continues to adapt to the local culture and to offer opportunities for creativity. One Colombian facilitator created a method for choosing the focus topics for the second-level workshop. Small working groups were to come up with three or fewer focus topics. Each topic was put on a separate large card and taped to the wall. This made it convenient to regroup the topics into categories that were similar. In another activity, the facilitators asked participants to make a web (with string or yarn) for a brainstorm in the training for facilitators on what makes a good team. At the end it was clear that everyone contributed to and was connected to the team and in different ways. The fish bowl was also effective in brainstorming with the quick moving to the chairs for speakers making everyone lively and attentive. These innovative ways of doing typical AVP exercises would be useful in other workshops.

There was lots of humor. In the Broken Cubes, Audrey gave a hint to one of the participants.

This was later referred to by a Colombian facilitator as "another international intervention" which brought a chuckle from everyone. At the end of the Advanced Workshop in Montería, Val and Audrey gave the participants some mangoes as a joke gift. There had been mangoes falling from the trees and they were abundantly available—hardly a gift. (The younger folks on our facilitation team cooked up this plan.) Everyone got a big laugh out of this. At the end of their training for facilitators these folks decided to call themselves Team Mango.

In the training for facilitators in Montería, one of the teams being trained made a creative innovation in their presentation of Transforming Power, the central focus of AVP. Each of the group of trainees explained a piece of the Transforming Power Circle starting with transforming power at the center. There the facilitator made a circle with took two participants.

Then another facilitator talked about the second level of the circle and drew in enough people to make a full circle outside of the first one. In a similar fashion, an outer circle was made and then the human circles walked in opposite directions as the facilitators talked about how the pieces of the Transforming Power circle work together. It was very powerful. In the



Transforming Power Circle

feedback to this team it was suggested that big circles with the words of the Transforming Power Circle could be put on the floor to make it even more graphic.

The folks in the workshops had varied occupations. Some were helping their community learn new skills to make money. There were teachers, psychologists, social workers, and pastors (who usually held other jobs as well). Several people were unemployed.

Several of the people in each of the first four workshops had been displaced from their home communities and couldn't go back because of threats of violence. Some have witnessed horrible murders. One moment that had great emotional impact occurred when a woman giving an example of an "I" statement said, "I felt sad when my husband was disappeared because now I will have to raise our daughter alone." ("I" statements are part of the communication techniques that are taught in AVP workshops.)

In evaluations, many participants stated that they recognized that peace begins within each one of us. Several people said they learned that the different churches can work for a common cause that isn't in contradiction to their beliefs.

Other comments:

"The acknowledgment exercise will enrich me."

"Part of the marvel of transforming power is to expect the best in others."

"I feel lighter and can fly freely."

"I liked the respect and tolerance in the group which was multicultural, intergenerational, and multi-religious."



Untangling a "human knot"

"The group helped me with my desire to continue going forward with this work."

The participants in the workshops were extremely enthusiastic about "multiplying" the work throughout Colombia as well as in their local communities. We heard, "These workshops will really help my community deal with violence," and "We can't wait to begin workshops in our communities." Most participants work with programs that serve poor and/or displaced people who live near big cities. In both Sincelejo and in Montería, the newly trained facilitators set up a meeting later in the summer to do more specific planning of Basic workshops for their communities and organizations.

The four facilitators with whom we worked are now ready to facilitate workshops at any level, without needing outside help. They and the participants in these workshops are very highly motivated and have lots of talent to continue the work. We feel blessed to have met and worked with such wonderful, dedicated people.

Exploring Local Partnerships

In addition to our work with the PAV-Colombia group (AVP is *PAV* in Spanish), we visited with various local and international groups working in the area. We met with Justapaz and the Comité Andino de Servicio (CAS), the Friends Meeting in Bogotá, REMPAZ (the Women's Ecumenical Peace Network) and with the Collective of Conscientious Objectors. We talked with a representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation project in the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó. We were not able to meet with Peace Brigades International or Witness for Peace as we have done in the past. While we received less detailed information concerning the current situation by not meeting with the latter groups, our meetings with others were fruitful in regard to openings for further work.

The Collective of Conscientious Objectors This group is made up almost entirely of men and women under the age of 25. Colombia, in theory, has universal obligatory military service for young men. Those who do not have their military service documents in order cannot get employment with Colombian firms nor graduate from the university. Some young men evade the service requirement by paying a fee (or a bribe?) of approximately \$250 USD to officials, but as one CO said, "If I object to war, why would I give this money to the government to continue the war?"

The Collective has four areas of work: seeking legal ways to challenge military conscription, and countering the recruitment by nongovernmental groups (guerrillas and paramilitaries); supporting and promoting conscientious objection; supporting COs in their resistance and seeking economic alternatives not only to multinational/commercial forces, but also to develop sustainable alternatives to the formal economy. For several years they have mounted a number of activities, including protests, conferences, and prayer vigils and fasts. They have contacts with national and international networks of COs, war resisters, and human-rights activists. There are twelve groups of COs within Colombia and they present programs in high schools and colleges. (Two participants in the AVP workshop in Montería were from such a group.)

They are currently using AVP in their efforts to learn personal nonviolence, and asked FPT to help them find ways to expand AVP's teaching to prepare and sustain local "civil resistance." They also hope that FPT will help them form ties of solidarity with international groups who can help support individual COs in their resistance as well as advocate for legal recognition of COs. These links can help in emergency situations and also encourage the work of more isolated groups. They consider as their allies other groups doing work in opposition to militarization (including Justapaz, CAS, and some churches), and groups struggling for their rights, such as feminists, indigenous, and peace communities.



Military cadets marching in Bogotá in National Plaza

The **Andean Service Committee** (*Comité Andino de Servicio*—CAS), a program of the American Friends Service Committee, works with poor people, especially women, indigenous, Afro-Colombians, displaced people, and small farmers in several regions of the country. They promote informational and skill-building workshops and conferences, work intensively with women's groups and offer opportunities for delegations of foreigners to see firsthand the effects of the programs promoted by the US and Colombian governments. These include the aerial fumigation of coca and opium poppies (which destroys food crops and injures livestock and humans); programs to convert coastal areas into large plantations of African palm, displacing small farmers (many of them Afro-Colombians) and other environmentally destructive programs such as clear-cutting tropical hardwoods. A major focus is anti-militarization. CAS has connections with national and international groups of conscientious objectors, and has published materials on the forced recruitment of child soldiers by nongovernmental forces. They are especially concerned with the fate of girls in guerrilla groups, who are often forced to provide sexual services as well as to face combat.

The small **Friends Meeting of Bogotá** met with us for an evening of worship and fellowship. One of its founding members was seriously ill and could not attend, but several of his colleagues with the Permanent Commission on Human Rights attended. The Meeting, although having fewer than half a dozen members and attenders, is very concerned with conditions in the country. In addition to their work on human rights, the other two members work professionally, one as a psychologist and one as a physical

therapist. They told us about the need for more services for displaced people and others affected by the war.

Justapaz, (the Mennonite Agency for Justice, Peace, and Nonviolence) has been FPT's chief partner organization in Colombia. They work most often with Protestant groups, promoting peace and strengthening leadership and networks, especially in the fields of nonviolence, conscientious objection, and demilitarization. Other work of Justapaz includes conflict analysis and transformation, communication with outside groups, and documentation for international advocacy. They work to develop a faith-based approach to peacemaking. "In this work for peace, the challenges are permanent, personal, and ongoing. Working for peace cannot be only a discussion, it must involve personal change. We use the structure of churches to call the people together to examine their personal commitment and actions for peace," said one Justapaz staff member.

REMPAZ (*Red Ecumenica de Mujeres por la Paz*—Ecumenical National Network of Women for Peace) works with similar groups, including Catholic organizations. Much of their work is with women in displaced communities. REMPAZ addresses the underlying culture of violence by focusing on domestic violence and its impact on women. They seek to strengthen the role of women in many aspects, by openly confronting a male-dominated society in churches, organizations, and in the home. Many of the women they work with suffer from domestic violence, which they see in part as a result of the culture of violence that underlies the war. They see the empowerment of women as the best way to counter the top-down hierarchical organization of churches and other organizations.

Recommendations for ongoing work

With the AVP program, we can continue to provide counsel, funding, and occasional volunteer facilitators for further work, especially with expansion into areas/regions where multinational teams may be advantageous. We can help facilitate contacts with other Latin American AVP programs and Spanish-speaking facilitators. As PAV-Colombia grows, they hope to open an office and maintain a library of AVP and nonviolence materials, to which we can contribute. We hope to take advantage of the offer of a Friend to make a video of AVP work in Colombia for use within the

country as well as in the US. A speaking/fund-raising tour in North America for one or more of the facilitators is possible. Because of the outreach by the FPT team, PAV-Colombia will try to incorporate participation by members of the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartadó and of the Friends Meeting of Bogotá (which includes people who work with the Permanent Commission on Human Rights) in AVP workshops.

"In this work for peace, the challenges are permanent, personal, and ongoing. Working for peace cannot be only a discussion, it must involve personal change."

PAV-Colombia, Justapaz, CAS, and the conscientious objectors' group are all very interested in the trauma healing and reconciliation work being done by FPT's African Great Lakes Initiative, and hope to be able to experience examples of the African training as soon as possible. (AGLI's Healing and Rebuilding Our Communities manual is expected to be available in English by the end of this year.) They also want to expand AVP work with their constituencies. As a result of our visits, PAV-Colombia has a pending proposal for work with Justapaz and hopes to present a proposal for work with CAS later this year.

The conscientious objectors' group hopes FPT can facilitate connections with international supporters. They have requested help with training in "civil resistance," which includes direct action, an area that standard AVP does not (yet) cover.

We are exploring possibilities of sending a delegation to Colombia to learn more about the work of our partners and to support them in their activities.



Displaced woman and child in Sincelejo

Dear members of the Friends PeaceTeams Board and Council,

On behalf of the AVP Colombian facilitators (Alba L. Arrieta, Alejandro Parra, Edith Guasca and Wilfredo Benítez) we want to thank you for your financial support during all this hard work we did last June and July with Val Liveoak and Audrey Miller's help. Both of them were of great help for us in our work as AVP facilitators.

It was a very rich experience where we, as AVP facilitators, confirmed our option for nonviolence and peace. We learned a lot through those experiences. We also could encourage people attending the courses to reflect on their own capacity to be practitioners of peace. Many touching and important things happened that have become a challenge for us and for them in our work as AVP facilitators.

People in Montería and Sincelejo have joined as local AVP teams in order to plan and expand their work in both places. I will have the chance to accompany them in the second semester of this year to help them to replicate the Basic AVP workshop. I hope I can go to Baranquilla to help the facilitators there, too. This will complete the project, supported by the WCC through the Ecumenical National Network of Women for Peace, for this year.

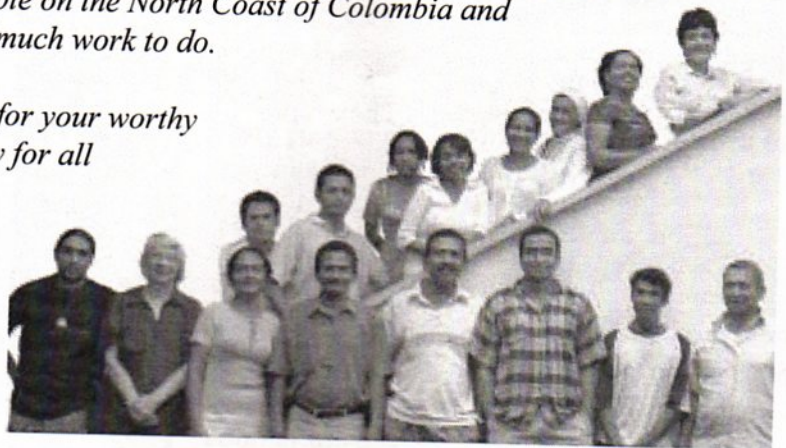
Next October we will facilitate a workshop for church people and for NGOs workers, including people from the Andean Service Committee and maybe Conscience Objectors, in Bogotá. We are contacting people for this.

There is also a chance to do the same in Medellín with Catholic Franciscan Nuns who are interested in working this area of nonviolence in the schools they have there. We plan to work first with directors, board people and teachers of those schools.

Alejandro is contacting some other people and schools with the same interest of working on nonviolence. Wilfredo will give us the information to contact a person interested in AVP workshops for displaced people on the North Coast of Colombia and also in Sincelejo. So there will be much work to do.

Once again, thank you very much for your worthy help, and thanks to Val and Audrey for all you did to make us grow as AVP facilitators.

*Blessings and peace,
Alba Luz Arrieta
Coordinator, PAV-Colombia*



Montería Apprentice Facilitators